

Chinese Minority-themed Films Translation and its Communication Among English-Speaking Audiences

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Abstract: Studies on translation skills and communication of Chinese minority-themed films among English-speaking audiences show that film critics are interested in the material and ecological culture presented in these films, while general audiences are interested in universal themes, topics with small cultural differences, and distinctive ethnic cultures. Investigation into the international communication shows that online platforms are the main platform for English-speaking audiences to watch Chinese minority-themed films, and “word-of-mouth recommendations” are an effective pathway for their communication. To improve the international communication effectiveness of Chinese minority-themed films among English-speaking audiences, it is necessary to expand distribution channels under favorable government policies, cultivate excellent film talents who can tell Chinese minority-themed stories well, and develop high-end translators who can effectively communicate these films internationally, thereby enhancing their international communication effectiveness.

Keywords: *Chinese Minority-themed films; English-speaking audiences; translation; international communication.*

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Introduction

Research on the international communication of Chinese films has mainly focused on the Chinese film titles, subtitle translation, translation strategies for ethnic minority film titles, the history of ethnic minority cinema, cultural studies in film, and the translation and promotion of film-related literature. Subtitle translation is considered a major issue affecting the international communication of Chinese films^①. However, before discussing translation, we believe it is essential to clarify which films are worth translating, who the audience is, and what current audiences expect from Chinese films. Otherwise, it would not benefit the international communication of Chinese cinema. It should be noted that Chinese films, including ethnic minority films, share common characteristics in their international communication. To understand the overseas communication of Chinese minority-themed films, this paper examines their translation and communication from the perspectives of film critics and general English and American audiences, then provides suggestions for enhancing their international communication effectiveness based on the survey results.

Chinese Films Communication Among English-Speaking Audiences

Frequent cultural exchanges between China and English-speaking countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have increased English-speaking audiences' interest in Chinese films. Chinese films show positive momentum in North American distribution, with English-speaking respondents representing the highest proportion among survey participants who have watched more than 20 Chinese films across different language regions^②.

Regarding overseas audiences' preferences for Chinese film themes, research shows that Western audiences prefer contemporary realistic themes, while audiences in neighboring countries favor historical martial arts and war themes. Foreign audiences generally believe that Chinese films' cultural influence is gradually growing; Chinese films have high recognizability in storytelling, music, and philosophy, possessing unique charm^③.

However, studies also point out several persistent issues in the overseas distribution of Chinese films:

- Subtitle translations fail to convey meaning accurately
- Stories lack universal values
- Lack of true cultural diversity and value conflicts

- American audiences' recognition of cultural spirit and national image conveyed by Chinese films is significantly lower than other countries
- American audiences' overall impression of Chinese films is correspondingly lower^⑤

In light of these issues, experts have proposed corresponding strategies:

- Chinese films should establish cultural transmission concepts and adopt internationalized discourse to present China's image.
- Chinese films must expand into overseas markets through international co-productions and acquisitions of foreign media companies.
- Enhance Chinese films' innovation capacity to secure a commanding position in international cultural communication in the multimedia era.

Obviously, while these suggestions positively promote the overseas communication of Chinese films, due to the unique nature of ethnic minority films, their reception and communication among English-speaking audiences should also have distinct characteristics. Accordingly, this paper investigates the current reception of Chinese minority-themed films among English-speaking audiences.

Chinese Minority-themed films Communication Among English-Speaking Audiences

This paper conducted research on the reception and communication of Chinese Minority-themed films among Chinese and English-speaking audiences using literature review and questionnaire methods. The literature review primarily examined film critics' reviews, while the questionnaire survey focused on general English-speaking audiences' responses. We designed a survey that passed reliability and validity tests and received IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval. The questionnaire covered two main areas: current reception and communication status. A total of 60 people participated (30 each from the UK and US).

Film Critics' Perspectives

International film awards represent professional judgments based on film quality. From the list of internationally awarded Chinese Minority-themed films compiled by Shi Bogong and Huang Ruilu, we selected four films and analyzed professional critics' published comments to understand their reception of these films^⑥:

- **2002 "The 17-Year-Old Girl of Ama" Golden Award for Best Film at France's Cap Film Festival:**

This film is reminiscent of films from the mid-80s, such as "Youth Sacrifice," in many ways. Compared to earlier mainland films, these films take a more realistic approach to the lives of Chinese ethnic minorities, but are very well filmed. **The film's location in the Ailao Mountains of southern Yunnan Province makes it more natural and authentic**, extensively using both Hani language and Mandarin. The only weakness is that the Hani people are overly idealized while the Han people have numerous flaws.

- **2008 "Long Song" Best Feature Film at the 3rd Cologne International Film Festival, Germany:**

The story primarily follows a melancholic singer who refuses to perform in Beijing and returns to the desert. The film directly addresses the interdependence between animals and humans in this sparsely populated region, quietly showing the erosion of modernization. Although the female lead's emotional expression is insufficient, **the striking landscapes and colorful customs** make this film entirely suitable for screening at various festivals and specialized film events.

- **2012 "Thangka" Beijing International Film Festival Ethnic Film Love Chain Award nomination for Best Heritage Award:**

Thangka painting master Dunzhu sacrificed his entire life for creating thangkas. Before completing his life's most beautiful masterpiece, he unexpectedly discovers he will soon go blind. Dunzhu's son has always wanted to become his father's heir. However, the father is dissatisfied with his son's Westernized painting style and decides to search the vast grasslands for his master's beloved successor. To his surprise, the master's prophecy appears in a young man with an amputated arm who knows nothing about painting. Is he really the master's successor? Through thangka, this film depicts Tibet's modernization and Tibetans' devotion and dedication to religion and art. **Tibet's beautiful scenery makes this film even more enchanting.**

- **2017 "The Taste of Rice Flower" Special Mention at the 74th Venice International Film Festival:**

Although simple, "The Taste of Rice Flower" doesn't make hasty moral judgments, nor is its plot stale. Peng Fei doesn't simply resort to exoticism but strives to show the emergence of hybrid cultures and various values where past traditions conflict with modern technology—conflicts that often appear rigid but undoubtedly amusing. This young director, educated in Paris, must also thank his senior cinematographer Liao Pengrong (who has shot most of Tsai Ming-liang's films) for his help in **maximally excavating the beauty and meaning of objects and scenes—such as the iron rice cakes in the pot and soft drink cans in the cave**. The story of "The Taste of Rice Flower" is full of contrasts and conflicts, appearing flawlessly beautiful, tasting sweet and sour, showing superior craftsmanship, and leaving a pleasant aftertaste.

In summary, whether it's award-winning films from 2002 or 2017, despite 15 years passing, international film critics' impressions still focus on the material culture and ecological culture presented in Chinese Minority-themed films. This fully demonstrates that what is ethnic is universal—Chinese Minority-themed films rooted in ethnic culture can gain acceptance and recognition from English-speaking audiences.

General English-Speaking Audiences' Perspectives

While film critics have professional backgrounds and evaluate films from a higher perspective, surveying general English-speaking audiences' responses is more representative. We distributed 60 questionnaires and received 39 valid responses. The questionnaire covered three main areas: film content, viewing platforms, and film distribution channels.

Survey data regarding film content shows: General English-speaking audiences demonstrated greater inclusivity and acceptance towards universal themes, topics with minimal cultural differences, and distinctive ethnic cultural elements presented in Chinese Minority-themed films. Specific survey findings include:

- General viewers are interested in mythological legends, survival issues, and human-nature relationships in Chinese Minority-themed films. Survey data shows: 24% related to mythological legends, 21% to survival in extreme circumstances, and 17% to human-nature relationships. (See Figure 1)

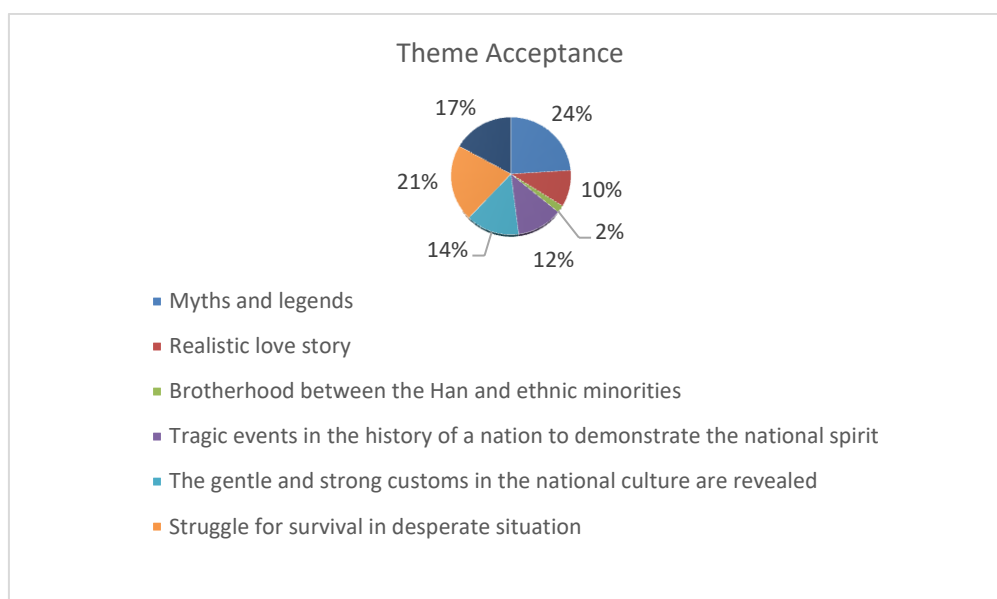


Figure 1: Theme Acceptance

General viewers are interested in costume culture, historical culture, and song and dance culture in Chinese Minority-themed films. (See Figure 2)

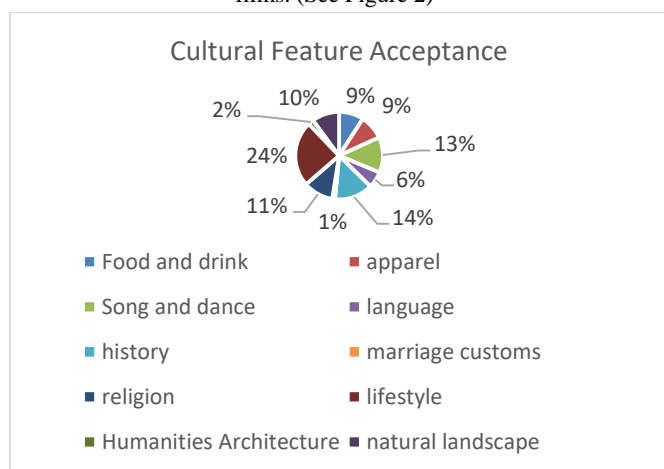


Figure 2: Cultural Feature Acceptance

- General viewers are interested in adventure action films, documentaries, comedies, suspense films, and fantasy films. (See Figure 3)

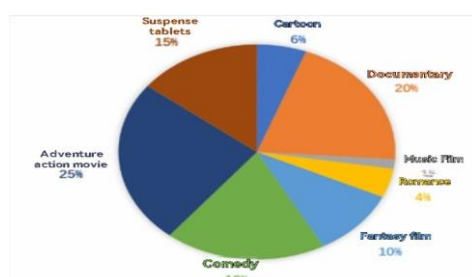


Figure 3: Film Genre Acceptance

- “Ethnic minority language + English subtitles” or “English dubbing + English subtitles” are presentation methods readily accepted by general viewers.
- “Anthropological value—ethnic diversity, civilizational equality, etc.” and “artistic aesthetic value” are film values readily accepted by general viewers.
- Uyghur, Mongolian, and Tibetan films are the preferred subjects for general English-speaking viewers.

When investigating the international communication status of Chinese Minority-themed films, we examined indicators such as viewing platforms, viewing media, and pathways for accessing film information. Survey data shows that “online viewing” is the main platform for Chinese ethnic minority film distribution; “word-of-mouth recommendations” is an effective pathway for their communication. High-quality films and good reputation are guarantees for the widespread distribution of Chinese Minority-themed films. Specific data shows:

- Internet and television are the main viewing platforms. (See Figure 4)

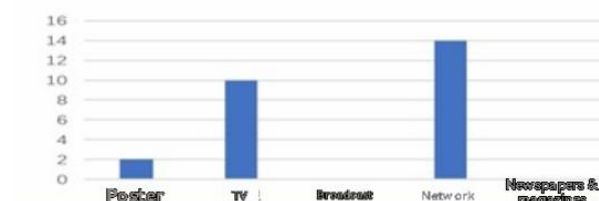


Figure 4: Viewing Platforms and Information Source Channels

- Computers, movie theaters, and DVD/CVD are the main viewing media. (See Figure 5)

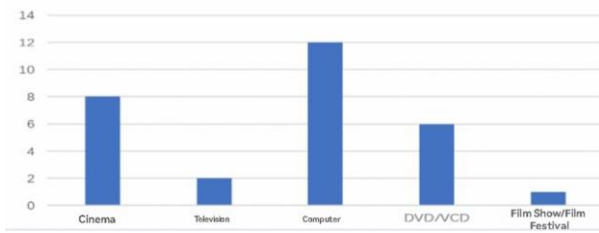


Figure 5: Viewing Media

- “Word-of-mouth recommendations” and “high box office films” are the main pathways for general English and American audiences to obtain film information.

Finally, this paper investigated factors affecting the international communication of Chinese Minority-themed films. Survey results show:

- Over 75% of English-speaking viewers believe that Chinese Minority-themed films lack influence and are even marginalized in the film market.
- “Communication barriers between ethnic groups preventing emotional resonance” is the most important factor affecting communication. “Insufficient funding” and “inadequate promotion” are also viewed as two major factors limiting the communication of Chinese Minority-themed films.

In summary, the current status of international communication of Chinese Minority-themed films shows: Online platforms are the main platform for English-speaking audiences to watch these films. “Word-of-mouth recommendations” is an effective pathway for their communication. The main factors affecting their communication are film quality, reputation, funding, and promotional efforts. Obviously, how to enhance the influence of Chinese Minority-themed films among English-speaking audiences requires further research.

International Communication Strategies for Chinese Minority-themed films

Relying solely on “word-of-mouth recommendations” and “high box office” for communication makes it difficult for Chinese Minority-themed films to achieve broad international communication influence. Survey data shows that both expert audiences and general audiences are interested in the universal values and distinctive ethnic cultures presented in Chinese Minority-themed films, which means these films have a certain level of acceptance among English-speaking audiences. However, their communication effectiveness needs improvement.

Leverage National Favorable Policies and Ethnic Characteristics to Empower International Communication

Funding has always been a major issue in Chinese filmmaking. To better promote the development and international communication of Chinese films, since 2001, the government has implemented a series of policies to promote the development and international communication of Chinese films, including ethnic minority films, through policy guidance, financial support, and platform building.

First, favorable policies have been issued to guide Chinese Minority-themed films into international markets. Between 2001 and 2016, the government issued 7 policies to encourage the international communication of Chinese films or Chinese Minority-themed films. In 2014, the “Notice on Several Economic Policies Supporting Film Development” was issued to encourage Chinese film enterprises to go global. In 2016, the National Film Industry Development Special Fund Management Committee issued a “Notice on Rewarding Outstanding Domestic Films’ Overseas Promotion Work” to encourage more Chinese films to reach the world.

Second, funds have been established to support Chinese Minority-themed films entering international markets through project-based or reward-based funding. The “Film Administration Regulations” states that Chinese Minority-themed films can receive special development funds. The “Implementation Rules for the Radio, Film and Television ‘Going Global Project’ “ (Trial) promotes the international communication of Chinese Minority-themed films through “Going Global Project” initiatives. The “Several Opinions on Accelerating Film Industry Development” encourages Chinese films and Chinese Minority-themed films to explore overseas markets by increasing international publicity and translation funding. The “National Film Industry Development Special Fund Collection and Usage Management Measures” and “Central Level National Film Industry Development Special Fund Budget Management Measures” stipulate that Chinese film production units or Chinese units authorized to handle overseas business can receive corresponding rewards for high box office performance. In 2013, the “Chinese Ethnic Minority Film Project” was launched to further promote Chinese Minority-themed films in international markets.

Finally, various domestic and international promotion platforms have been built to expand international communication channels for Chinese Minority-themed films. The 2004 “Several Opinions on Accelerating Film Industry Development” encourages centralized promotion and marketing through intermediary institutions to help film enterprises utilize various channels to explore overseas markets. The first Beijing International Film Season in 2011 specially set up an ethnic film exhibition, selecting 30 ethnic minority language films for screening, building a promotion platform for the international communication of Chinese Minority-themed films. The 2016 “Film Industry Promotion Law of the People’s Republic of China” advocates comprehensively utilizing diplomatic, cultural, educational, and other external exchange resources to conduct overseas film promotion activities. Additionally, the government has issued multiple policies to encourage and support international co-production formats to improve the acceptance of Chinese Minority-themed films in English-speaking countries.

In summary, enhancing the international communication effectiveness of Chinese Minority-themed films requires strong government policy support, achieving quality in Chinese ethnic minority film creation through financial support, and enhancing their influence through building international platforms.

Cultivate High-End Translators and Improve Subtitle Translation Quality to Tell Chinese Ethnic Minority Stories Well

Universal themes such as mythological stories and human-nature relationships in Chinese Minority-themed films, as well as distinctive ethnic cultural elements like costumes and song and dance, are topics that interest English-speaking audiences. Telling these ethnic stories internationally requires empowerment through translation. Through translation, we can tell Chinese ethnic minority stories to the world. Not only must translations of titles and subtitles be close to China's development reality and foreign audiences' information needs about China, but the translations must also align with foreign audiences' thinking patterns and language habits. Therefore, having a high-level film translation team is key to enhancing the international communication effectiveness of Chinese Minority-themed films. In fact, our government has made positive contributions in encouraging and supporting film translation work.

- Translation institutions have been established to help tell Chinese ethnic minority film stories well. In 2012, CCTV's International Channel established its **Film and Television Translation Center**. In 2014, the "National Multilingual Film and Television Translation Base" was established. In 2017, the "Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China" required strengthening **film translation work in ethnic minority languages**. In 2019, the "National Multilingual Film and Television Translation Base" settled in Shanghai. These series of measures encourage telling Chinese film stories and Chinese ethnic minority film stories internationally.
- Cultivate excellent Chinese ethnic minority film creators. In April 2014, the "First Ethnic Minority Film and Television Screenwriters Training Program" was held. 50 screenwriting talents dedicated to ethnic minority film and television creation were selected for the first screenwriting training program. Among them were more than 20 ethnic minority students from over ten ethnicities including Manchu, Tibetan, Qiang, Maonan, Daur, Yi, Zhuang, Gelao, Bai, Hui, Mongolian, Tujia, and Miao. Screenplay planning agreements for the "Ethnic Minority Film Project" have been signed with more than 40 screenwriters.
- Cultivate high-quality translators. To cultivate high-end applied translators, the Ministry of Education launched the Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) degree in 2007. This degree aims to cultivate high-level, applied, professional translation and interpreting talents who are well-developed in moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic aspects, can adapt to the needs of global economic integration and enhance international competitiveness, and meet national socio-economic and cultural construction needs. It was approved in 2007, began enrollment in 2008, and as of 2021, over 300 institutions nationwide have established MTI programs. Through school-enterprise cooperation training methods, they enhance students' translation abilities and have produced batch after batch of excellent translators for society.

Comprehensively Develop Communication Channels to Enhance International Communication Effectiveness

Survey data shows that the current communication of Chinese Minority-themed films mainly relies on "word-of-mouth recommendations" and "high box office performance," indicating that word-of-mouth transmission is the most common method among English-speaking audiences. However, word-of-mouth transmission has significant limitations. To quickly and effectively enhance the international communication effectiveness of Chinese Minority-themed films, we should:

- First, continue to increase international co-production efforts, expanding the influence of Chinese Minority-themed films through mainstream channels such as international film festivals and theatrical releases.
- Second, integrate effective resources of overseas Chinese communities and expand cultural exchange activities, such as "Happy Spring Festival" and "Chinese Film Week" traditional cultural events, to promote Chinese Minority-themed films.

Finally, expand multimedia channels, strengthen cooperation with Western mainstream media and film review websites, invite influential columnists and bloggers to write reviews, produce behind-the-scenes footage and actor interviews, and increase film exposure from multiple angles to enhance the international communication effectiveness of Chinese Minority-themed films.

Conclusion

Film is one of the important cultural product forms for a country's international communication. Faced with the strategic goal of "advancing international communication capacity building, telling China's story well, presenting a true, three-dimensional, and comprehensive China, and improving national cultural soft power," film has been incorporated as an important component of international communication capacity building and cultural soft power construction, becoming an important strategy for communicating national image and culture. As an important component of Chinese cinema, ethnic minority films bear the responsibility of promoting Chinese ethnic cultures globally and should receive strong support and nurturing. Chinese Minority-themed films were once "hidden away unknown to the world," becoming "invisible films" in the film market. Today, they have won numerous awards on the international stage, demonstrating certain international influence. To further enhance the international influence of Chinese Minority-themed films, we need government leadership and cooperation from all sectors. On one hand, we must rely on favorable national policies and multiple international communication channels; on the other hand, we must understand English and American audiences' reception expectations and psychological expectations, focus on ethnic culture, ensure the quality of Chinese Minority-themed films, use the camera to tell Chinese stories well, and use translation to effectively communicate Chinese voices, thereby enhancing the international communication effectiveness of Chinese Minority-themed films.

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